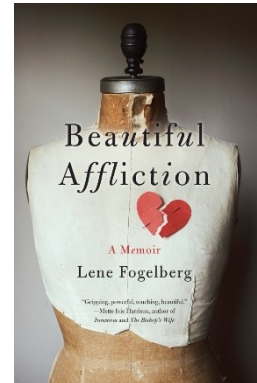


Discussion Guide

Beautiful Affliction: A Memoir

By Lene Fogelberg

1. When Lene describes her childhood, she comments that she sometimes felt like “we are living on different planets, six people in the same house, the same family...” (p. 19). Have you ever felt similarly? How do we bridge the distance between our individual planets without losing our individuality?
2. Lene often uses the metaphor of “the riddle” and “the monster” (which she’s partly sympathetic to). After reading Lene’s story, how would you describe the riddle and the monster? Do we all have riddles and monsters to uncover?
3. Lene often speaks of her love for books and poetry, especially Edith Södergran’s.
4. What role did the written word play in Lene’s story? What role has it played in yours?
5. After one especially disappointing visit to the Government Insurance Bureau, Anders and Lene in their anger half-jokingly consider smashing the glass shelter at a bus stop. Do you think they carried out their plans? Why or why not? What role does humor and fantasizing play in how we deal with difficult emotions?
6. More than once, Lene describes Anders as her only believer. What difference, if any, does it make to have such a believer at your side?
7. For relationships to survive and thrive, partners need to learn how to balance their needs with those of their partner. How did Anders and Lene manage to do this (or not) throughout their journey?
8. Even with Anders and the support of a loving family, Lene’s loneliness is palpable. Is there always loneliness in affliction? Is it possible to truly ease someone else’s loneliness, or is loneliness inevitable in deep trials?
9. Lene’s relationship with her body is a complicated one, and mostly described as troubled. Right before her surgery, however, as she examines her body for what might be the last time, Lene makes a kind of peace with her body (p. 236). How has your relationship with your body formed your life and your physical and mental well-being? If you have overcome body issues in the past, how has making peace with your own body influenced your quality of life?
10. Lene’s nurse – the one who discovered blood in the tubes following the first surgery – clearly meant a lot to Lene. Small gestures such as braiding Lene’s hair, humming



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to Lene, and holding Lene's hand seemed almost as important as the medical help she provided. How meaningful have such small gestures been in your life? How have you or others gone beyond the call of duty to truly serve another?

11. Following the surgery, Lene experiences extreme thirst, but is forbidden to ingest even one drop of liquid. She describes her first drink – a glass of apple juice – in quite vivid terms. (p. 280) Have you had any (metaphorical or literal) “apple juice moments”? How can we experience more “apple juice moments” in our day-to-day life?
12. Throughout the narrative, several symbols emerge: the cicadas, towers, doors, the relationship between light and darkness, even Lene's childhood teddy bear. How do symbols give us comfort and help us make sense of our lives? What are some symbols that have emerged in your own life journey?
13. Anders, Lene's daughters, and Lene's parents all express their love to Lene in different ways. Lene's father, for example, assembled a chest of drawers. How can we become more in tune and understanding with each other's ways of expressing love?
14. Which scenes in Lene's story played out most vividly in your mind? Anything you related with particularly strongly? Why?
15. Lene tells her story in parallel in two different time periods – before the Fogelberg's move to Philadelphia and after. How does the structure of the book add to the richness of the story? Any specific chapter pairings that struck you as particularly powerful?
16. How is the title of the book, *Beautiful Affliction*, reflected in Lene's narrative? How can we learn to discover beauty in difficult circumstances?

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